Canadian Military Emergency Response: Highly Effective, but Rarely Part of the Plan

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GENERALLY, AMERICANS like to keep their soldiers out of civilian business. Fearing the potential oppression of a standing army, in 1787 the Nation's founding fathers sought to constrain it in the Constitution. That attitude still resonates with many Americans today.[1] They might occasionally vote former generals into public office, but the idea of an active duty officer forcibly inserting himself into civil affairs is abhorrent. Even in times of domestic calamity the U.S. Army has been expected to maintain a relative distance: It could intervene, but only after a request from civil authorities, and its efforts were to be secondary to those launched by civil authorities. In short, the Army was to subordinate itself unequivocally to civilian leadership.

The 2005 hurricane season might have changed some of that thinking. The response to Hurricane Katrina caused President George W. Bush to wonder aloud about expanding the Army's role in domestic emergencies. But if that role is expanded, how might a still-skeptical public react? How should the Army comport itself to allay suspicion about its motives?

For a few answers, we might consider Canada's Armed Forces. The Canadian military also responds to civil emergencies when asked—and sometimes when not asked. It, too, usually takes direction from civilian authorities. However, although the upper levels of the Canadian Government appear concerned about the military getting out of hand, the public is not.[2] A brief review of responses by Canadian Forces (CF) to domestic problems suggests why.

Accidents, Disasters, and Catastrophes

The history of CF domestic intervention indicates that in an emergency Canada's military can look after its own needs as well as provide well-equipped, well-organized personnel to respond to accidents, disasters, or catastrophes. As a rule, accidents occur at a single location and end quickly; there is no continuing threat. An accident could be a train wreck, a building collapse, or a plane crash, and its cause could be anything from mechanical failure to human error. Accidents are at the low end of the crisis scale. By contrast, a disaster spreads destruction, injury, and death over a wide area. Roads could be blocked and communications disrupted or overloaded. At the high end of the scale are catastrophes, which are so destructive they damage one or more communities' abilities to respond. Injuries and deaths number in the thousands; destruction is horrific; the response effort must be massive.

Canadian Forces have responded to all three kinds of crisis. They responded to—

- The 1985 Gander air crash, an accident in which 256 people, 248 of them from the 101st Airborne (Air Assault) Division, were killed.
- The 1998 ice storm in Eastern Canada that knocked out power to 15 percent of Canadian homes and forced scores of communities to declare states of emergency.
- The 1917 Halifax catastrophe where an ammunition ship exploded, setting Halifax on fire, killing 1,963 people, and injuring 9,000 more.

The response to the Gander air crash involved providing aid to another Federal department. The response to the ice storm came after a formal request for military assistance. The response in Halifax occurred because military personnel were among the victims.

Gander air crash. When a U.S. charter aircraft carrying 101st Airborne troops crashed at Gander, Newfoundland, on 12 December 1985, Canadian Forces Base (CFB) Gander became involved immediately.[3] Base personnel were part of the routine

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Downtown Halifax after the explosion, 1917.

emergency response plan at the airport and were therefore ready to go. The airport was run by Transport Canada, a Federal Government department, and the crash occurred on government property. CFB Gander's base commander joined others at the secure command post at Gander airport and made personnel available to assist as required. His presence was expected. During an airport emergency, he was always notified, and he always responded.

The first military response came from base fire department medics. Military police also went along to help with search and rescue. Since the crash site was littered with weapons and mortar shell casings, explosive ordnance disposal units soon deployed to help the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) ensure the site was safe. (Actually, the plane carried no ammunition; the mortar casings were only souvenirs.) CFB Gander also activated its Base Defence Force to provide perimeter security and sent other personnel to help the RCMP with body recovery and transport. When U.S. Army personnel arrived, the base commander welcomed them and invited their commanding officer to join the offsite command post at the airport.

January ice storm. But Gander was unusual. The military response to the January 1998 ice storm is more typical because it was spontaneous. For several days, large areas of Eastern Canada were struck by a series of ice storms that knocked down trees and disrupted power and telephone service. Icy roads made driving difficult and dangerous. The problems were particularly severe where residents depended on power to run water, furnaces, and toilets. Ottawa-Carleton's chief executive officer (XO) asked a senior staff member, a former Army engineer, to determine how they might obtain military assistance. The XO had no idea what the military could do or how many soldiers might be needed (a few hundred, he thought).

Ottawa's request for help went to the Ontario operations center in Toronto where it was passed to Land Forces Central Area, which decided to task 2 Canadian Mechanized Brigade Group (2CMBG) at CFB Petawawa. 2CMBG maintains an immediate reaction force, a company-size unit designated to respond in 12 hours or less. The reaction force quickly formed and deployed; however, the remainder of the battle group was on Christmas leave. 2CMBG issued an immediate recall for all troops taking home

leave in Ontario: 75 percent were back the same day. Eventually, 14,160 soldiers were deployed, of which 3,000 were reservists.

On arrival, the soldiers helped with the cleanup. They assisted at nursing homes that were short of staff. They provided extra ambulances. They picked up and delivered fuel, food, bottled water, and firewood. Some dug postholes for new telephone poles; others helped dairy farmers milk their cows by hand. Teams systemically surveyed the region, providing daily intelligence about what had been done and needed to be done. Those reports became the basis for civilian as well as military response.

The biggest challenge, however, was not in helping local governments, but in finding local governments to help. On 1 January 1988, many Ontario municipal boundaries had been changed. Because the new councils had not met and therefore had no emergency plans, the military sometimes could not determine who was in charge of the local government's response and who needed help. The problem was exacerbated where there was a dispute about who was in charge and where municipal offices should be located.

The military could have seen this as a chance to take control, or it could have tried to make local government effective. Choosing the second alternative, it helped establish which elected person would take charge and then worked with that person. In 1998, Lieutenant Colonel James W. Kerr, an American pioneer in civil preparedness, wrote: "Think of the dilemma faced by the troop commander—his soldiers are ready to support, there is plenty to be done, but there is no single identifiable civilian official to support. If there was ever an opportunity for the military to take charge this was it. . . . But Canadian doctrine and training prevailed, resulting in an exemplary disaster relief performance."[4]

The officer in charge, Brigadier General Rick Hillier (now General Hillier, Chief of Canada's Defence Staffs), made certain that his troops not only supported civilian government, but that they *appeared* to be doing so. When visits to the various emergency operation centers (EOCs) revealed that in some areas the military appeared to be dominating the response, he told his staff to correct the situation. Troops had to work in a separate part of the EOC, and it had to be clear to anyone visiting that civilians were in charge.

Halifax catastrophe. The situation in Halifax was quite different from the above incidents, for in 1917 Canadian Forces were among the victims. On 6 December, a French ship carrying munitions caught fire and exploded in Halifax harbor. The poorer residential North End of the city sustained the most harm, but Wellington Barracks was severely damaged and scores of military personnel and their families were injured. At the armories, flying glass and other debris hit recruits, cutting some severely, killing others. On the waterfront, the military medical reception center was destroyed. The new military hospital at Camp Hill was also significantly damaged, which meant military personnel, especially physicians and others with medical training, had to start by looking after their own people.

Within hours, community leaders met at the damaged city hall. They formed the Halifax Relief Committee to handle feeding, clothing, shelter, and transportation. The committee obtained a line of credit with the Bank of Nova Scotia. A retired Army engineer put together a plan that set up dressing stations around the impact area; stipulated arrangements to meet, transport, house, and assign incoming medical personnel; and established a medical supply center. The latter was run by pharmacists, with commercial travelers doing twice-daily deliveries to hospitals, temporary hospitals, and aid stations.

By the third day, after medical personnel had begun to catch up, they chose a Canadian Army Medical Corps (CAMC) physician, Lieutenant Colonel McKelvey Bell, to run the medical response. He took over the system and added daily inspection of all the medical facilities. Before long, Bell and his colleagues were joined by physicians from central Canada and neighboring U.S. states, and eye specialists from the CAMC. (Many victims had been blinded or partly blinded by glass splinters.) By then the military response in Halifax had expanded. Military units joined in search and rescue efforts and assisted at the city morgue. Other units took on security patrols, helped by sailors from two U.S. Navy ships, *Tacoma* and *Von Steuben,* which had seen the explosion and responded. Another U.S. Navy ship, the *Old Colony*, in harbor for repairs, became a temporary hospital ship.

Without prior planning, and in the midst of a catastrophe that claimed many of their own as victims, Canadian soldiers and sailors eventually helped wring order from chaos. The military did not need to be told what to do, but neither did it take over unilaterally; instead, it worked with Halifax leaders and emergency responders from other quarters and even countries in a cooperative venture to save as many lives and as much property as possible.

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Canadian divers check out some of the damage from Hurricane Katrina in the New Orleans area, 2005.

9/11: The Military Takes Charge

More recently, the military became involved after the United States closed its air space on 11 September 2001, a decision that diverted scores of commercial aircraft to Atlantic Canada. In most communities the passengers were looked after by local governments, with the CF providing assistance. In Gander, military personnel helped secure the airport. In Stephenville, CF armories became shelters. When five planes were diverted to Goose Bay, Labrador, virtually the entire response was directed by CFB Goose Bay with help from Britain, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands. Atypically, the Goose Bay operation amounted to a military takeover that shut out local government: Provincial Government Human Resources Employment provided some help, but the town, which had been on standby, was told its help was not needed.

Although it appeared Goose Bay might have to accept 20 to 30 diverted flights, it ended up with only 5. The CFB commander took charge, coordinating RCMP, customs, immigration, and Serco (an airport services company) activities. He concocted a plan to use the allies: Each country would handle one flight, and would appoint an officer to deal with the passengers. The Royal Air Force (RAF) would look after all flight crews and crewmembers would eat in the RAF mess. By then, town and local organizations such as the Canadian Red Cross, the Rotary Club, and the Catholic Women's League were ready to help. However, with all angles already covered, the base community relations officer told them they were appreciated, but not needed. When the mayor came to the base, he was initially refused entry to the command post; later it was arranged for him to meet with stranded passengers.

Other Types of Response

Canadian Forces have responded to scores of other accidents or disasters:

- The 1987 Barrie tornado.
- A paralyzing snowstorm in Prince Edward County, Ontario.
- Forest fires in New Brunswick and British Columbia.[5]
- A huge tire fire in Nanticoke (14 million used rubber tires burned for 18 days).[6]
- The Saguenay River flood in Quebec and the 1997 Red River floods.[7]
- Toxic spills on Vancouver Island and in Medicine Hat, Alberta.[8]

In most of these responses assistance was so informal that word did not immediately reach the upper levels of the Defence Department, the minister, or the cabinet. During the Nanticoke tire fire, for example, the Minister of the Environment told the House of Commons that the Ontario Government had rejected offers of federal aid. He explained that disasters are a

provincial responsibility: "The government respects the Constitution and the jurisdiction of the provinces and we cannot intervene . . . if the government of Ontario does not ask us to do so. . . . We have the army. We have the equipment. We want to go . . . , but we are not going to invade Ontario with Canadian troops."[9] (The Minister was unaware the Defence Department was already helping.)

Security Aid to Civil Power

Of course, military aid to disasters is much less controversial than military intervention in domestic security crises. Canadian Forces participated in the latter twice in the last 50 years and did so without alienating the populace.

In October 1970, in Quebec, a series of Separatist bombings, attacks on military installations, and high-profile kidnappings led the Federal Government to suspend civil liberties and invoke the War Measures Act. The attacks were part of the last, most violent attempt by the Front de la Liberation du Quebec (FLQ) to force Quebec's secession from Canada. Beginning in 1963 and using tactics that had worked for Cuban and Algerian insurgents, the FLQ bombed several government buildings, including National Defence Headquarters in Ottawa; attacked Prime Minister John Diefenbaker's train; planned to assassinate Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau; orchestrated violent demonstrations; and stole automatic weapons and antitank guns from Quebec military installations. Until then, the military response had been limited primarily to providing site security. In 1970, however, the crisis accelerated when FLQ cells first kidnapped a British trade commissioner, then later, a Quebec provincial cabinet minister. Intercepted notes suggested that the FLQ also planned to kidnap the U.S. consul in Montreal.

The major military response began on 14 October 1970, after the Quebec Government asked for aid. Troops immediately deployed to downtown Montreal, to vital points such as hydroelectric power plants, and to the homes of prominent politicians. A Canadian Airborne unit, 1 Commando, moving from Edmonton, was joined by units from CFB Gagetown, New Brunswick, and 1 Combat Group from Western Canada. Multiple aerial reconnaissance assets supported the deployment. All troops were governed by tight rules of engagement and told the worst thing that could happen was to shoot civilians accidentally. Leaders emphasized the need for good relations with the populace.

Military historian Sean Maloney has concluded that the response was necessary: Unit commanders deployed to Montreal noted that the police were extremely frightened and were incapable of doing their jobs without support. The atmosphere was bad and getting worse. According to Maloney, the deployment fostered a positive change in the atmosphere that gave a psychological boost to the police and the provincial government; it provided critical backbone for facing up to the threat.[10]

Twenty years later, in 1990, the problem was again in Quebec, this time with Mohawks protesting that land eyed for a golf course belonged to them. On 11 July, after the Mohawks had set up roadblocks, the Quebec Provincial Police responded. An officer was killed, and the Mohawks declared that if they were attacked again they would destroy the Mercier Bridge. Angry that three highways and one bridge were blocked, local residents rioted and attacked police.

When other armed supporters joined with the Mohawks, the Premier of Quebec asked for military assistance. On 20 August troops sealed off the area, controlling access and eventually cutting off aboriginal communications. In addition to deploying the French-Canadian Royal 22d Regiment and the Royal Canadian Regiment, the military patrolled the river. Troops were authorized to return fire, but were forbidden to start an operation using force. The uneasy prime minister demanded assurances that the troops were "under control."[11] The barricades finally came down on 26 September, 2-1/2 months after the first police action. There had been confrontations but, once the military took charge, no further violence. Once again, cautious rules of engagement and good discipline averted possible disaster. (The Mohawks retained their land, but overall, the confrontation was considered a standoff.)

Canadian Soldiers on U.S. Soil

One final example of CF intervention seems particularly relevant to this discussion: Canada's military assistance to the United States in 1992 in the wake of Hurricane Andrew. Prime Minister Brian Mulroney had been educated in Nova Scotia, where there are fond memories of the U.S. response to the 1917 Halifax explosion, and he wanted Canada to reciprocate. Soon after the hurricane, CF airfield engineers flew to Florida. They recommended Canada rebuild two severely damaged schools in Dade County and estimated the task would take 30 days. Supplies were immediately dispatched to Miami on a CF supply ship.

On arrival, the ship's crew took supplies to the site and began rebuilding the schools. The ship's medics

provided area assistance. Using generators to supply temporary power, the sailors rebuilt the schools in just 21 days. The local school board chairperson praised Canadian Forces: "Our friends from Canada, you express the universal concern for children, and it goes beyond the boundaries of countries and you demonstrate that so beautifully. Not only have you rebuilt these buildings but you have given us a new understanding of the military. . . , so disciplined, so caring, so good at problem solving, so unfazed by massive destruction. I wondered how when you first came to look at this how you knew what to do first. But somehow you know what to do first and then next."[12]

A Sense of Belonging

Time after time, Canadian Forces have responded to civilian emergencies. Sometimes the response was formal, and sometimes it involved the potential use of deadly force. Much more often, though, it was informal, owing to a local mutual aid agreement or because the military was in the community and wanted to help. Although senior government officials have sometimes worried about how internal military action might be perceived, the public appears to be supportive. Certainly the discipline, restraint, and low profile adopted by Canadian Forces have tempered civil-military antagonism. Perhaps the relative spontaneity of CF responses, as well as its sense of belonging to the greater (civilian) community, has helped also.

Most CF emergency responses were not anticipated or planned for by civilian emergency personnel. The involvement of CFB Gander in 1985 was the exception rather than the rule. The military's takeover of the response in Goose Bay on 9/11 was even more unusual. In fact, military response, while effective, is so rare in any one community that civilian authorities are usually unaware of what Canadian Forces can do and how they operate. Also, because Canada has nothing like a national guard, civilian leaders are often unfamiliar with military personnel per se or with military discipline. After the ice storm in 1998, local fire chiefs commented how young the soldiers were and how well they behaved.[13] It would seem useful to Canadian Forces—and perhaps to the U.S. Army—to heighten public awareness of military capacity. At the same time, the military should work to improve its understanding of human and organizational behavior in disasters.

Since the October crisis of 1970, the Canadian Government has made changes. It repealed the War Measures Act and replaced it with the Emergencies Act, which is far more restrictive when it comes to Federal intervention in a crisis. In addition, while a province can still request aid to the civil power, that aid is no longer automatic. Canada's Chief of Defence Staffs must first consult with, then take direction from, the Minister of National Defence.

These changes do not alter the fact that when emergencies occur Canadian Forces will respond, bidden or unbidden, and do so promptly, effectively, and with civilian support. Trust between civilians and soldiers will build through repeated demonstrations of competence, a properly subordinate military attitude, and a sense of inclusion in the greater community. ***MR***

NOTES

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